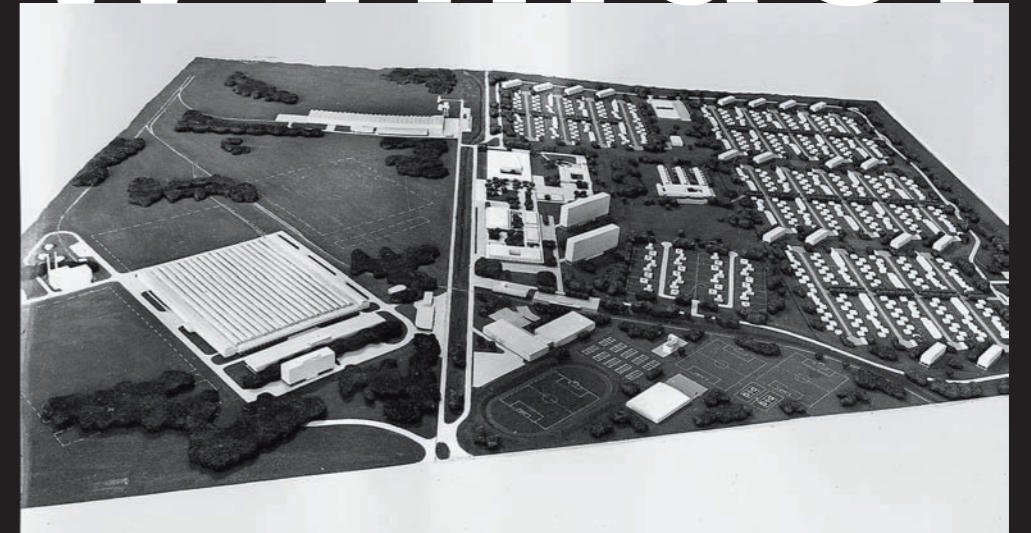


Far above it all: In his quest for the perfect picture, Heinz Bethke often used unconventional means



Text Tina Bauer
Photos Tina Bauer,
 Mercedes-Benz Classic Archives

View-finder



From 1953, Heinz Bethke – accompanied by his Contax camera – followed the development and growth of the Daimler-Benz plant located not far from Buenos Aires in Argentina. In the course of 25 years as factory photographer he took around 21,500 pictures – of vehicles, of the day-to-day activities at the plant and of high-ranking visitors. Recently, 81-year-old Bethke put a part of his photos at the disposal of the Mercedes-Benz Classic Archives. Now, Mercedes-Benz Classic shows a first selection of these pictures.



Truck production took up a great part of the Daimler-Benz plant near Buenos Aires

He collected signatures - from Juan Manuel Fangio, Karl Kling, Stirling Moss and Evy Rosqvist; Heinz Bethke hunted autographs for his colleagues whenever there was a racing event in Argentina. However, the former Daimler-Benz factory photographer in Buenos Aires did not only train his sights on racing cars, he also photographed corporate executives such as board members Fritz Könecke, Joachim Zahn and Walter Hitzinger; politicians, like German Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard, Argentina's president Juan Perón and Confederation of German Employers' Associations president Hanns Martin Schleyer; as well as celebrities such as soccer star Sepp Herberger. Outside work hours, executives and colleagues also recruited his services for birthday celebrations, christenings and weddings. "I was as famous as a one-legged dog," recalls the 81-year-old Bethke. "I was responsible for photographing all important visitors, congresses, press conferences, cars and spare parts. I also photographed the rapidly expanding production facilities both on the ground and from the air every year." And then there were documentary photographs of strikes and accidents such as the devastating factory fire of 1977.

Heinz Bethke learned his profession from scratch. His father had owned three photography stores in Wiesbaden before emigrating to Argentina with his two sons in the early fifties. At first Bethke junior worked an ID photo studio at a train station in Buenos Aires. His wife and her parents then followed him to the Argentine: on the three-week crossing from Germany she met Daimler-Benz representatives and

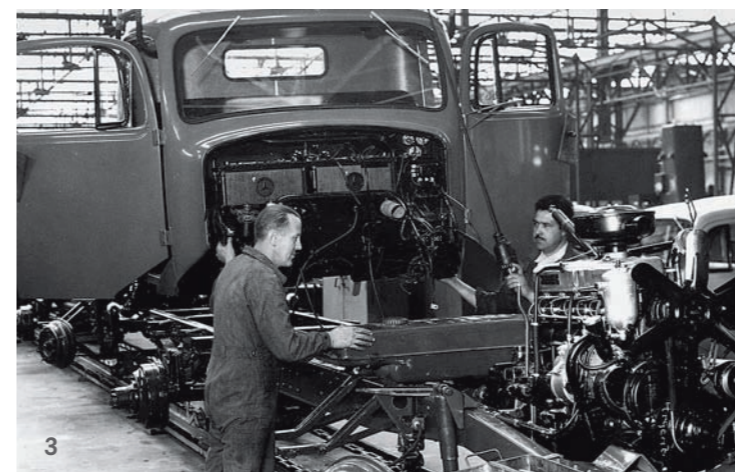
recommended her husband to them as a photographer. Heinz Bethke remembers the visit of Economics Minister Erhard as his baptism of fire: "I was very nervous and kept thinking about what my father had impressed on me: to always get sharp pictures - and then the flashlight failed; it was a disaster." In the end, though, Heinz Bethke did in fact manage to get some good pictures of one of the first German politicians to visit the Daimler-Benz plant in Argentina.

As early as 1952 Daimler-Benz began producing model 170 DS and 170 S-D passenger cars in Buenos Aires; these were much used in the Argentine, enjoying great popularity, in particular as taxis. To satisfy local demand for sturdy German autos with flatbed bodies, starting in the late sixties, assembly sets for the 220 D (W 115) model were sent from Germany and were even converted to pickups in a way that would have been unthinkable in that country: "The second door was simply cut off and a load surface installed," explains Bethke. Model series L 312 and L 322 medium-duty truck chassis, used for trucks and buses, are further examples of the products made in Buenos Aires.

In order to get good pictures, "Enrique", as his Argentinian colleagues used to call him, sometimes had to think up unconventional ways to work. Not only his polite, friendly manner was a positive asset for him; in particular his height - 190 centimeters (six foot four) - allowed him to keep a comfortable overview of everything. Even so, from time to time that was not enough and he had to perch atop a truck or be borne aloft by a forklift: "It was a good thing that I don't suffer from vertigo, because when standing up there it swayed mightily." His pictures

"Ludwig Erhard's visit was my baptism of fire."

1 Fritz Könecke (2nd from left) with German Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard (2nd from right) in Buenos Aires 2 A 220 D (W 115) pickup version was built in Buenos Aires 3 The assembly unit



4 Snapshot: The factory photographer at work 5 Heinz Bethke also photographed Argentine sales points and exhibition sites 6 The chaos after the devastating factory fire of 1977 was captured in dramatic images by Heinz Bethke



In the lab: "I usually went about in a white lab coat like a doctor"

Quality control: Parts are regularly subjected to close scrutiny

"I often had to work late into the night."



appeared in model brochures, in the Argentine press and in the company newspaper *Nuestra buena estrella* (Our good star). Bethke was also creative when it came to devising ways to deliver large-format prints for industrial fairs: "I had huge pans made, where I could develop the photographs on paper rolls." He mixed the developer himself and thus always "went about dressed in a white lab coat, like a doctor." One of his responsibilities in the laboratory was taking macro-photographs of fractures and of structures under the microscope in order to document any damage. "I was a handyman, so to speak – a girl Friday," he smiles.

Bethke was the only factory photographer at the Daimler-Benz plant in Buenos Aires. "This meant I had to do everything myself, but on the other hand it gave me enormous freedom." He was able to move at liberty everywhere on the plant premises, was not frisked at the gate and was provided with a car when it was necessary to photograph important visitors at the Daimler-Benz headquarters in the city center: "There was a constant coming and going, and I was always primed and ready." Bethke enjoyed great prestige: "I lunched with the department heads in the cafeteria and had the same health insurance as senior employees. I felt transported to a land flowing with milk and honey." When the factory shut down from 1956 until the end of 1958, he was especially lucky and in spite of the bad times was not fired – unlike hundreds of other employees, who were much worse hit.

For the privileges his job brought with it, Heinz Bethke was prepared to take the rough with the smooth; this included the long commute to

his place of work in the middle of nowhere, at Kilometer 43.5 of National Route 3: a two hours' drive in the morning aboard the company bus, and two hours back home of an evening. And his job made even more demands: "I was always on call, and often had to work late into the night, apart from which I had to develop the pictures at night, since there was no real darkroom. To cap it all, in the daytime it was very often stressful as well, because when visitors came, the prints had to be ready in a matter of a few hours, so that each guest could be given a book with pictures of his or her visit."

And visits were frequent, because the production facilities continued to expand. Soon a housing estate sprung up on the 217-hectare (536-acre) premises, with 186 houses for workers. A kindergarten followed, then a school and a public swimming bath. In its heyday, Daimler-Benz employed 3,000 people in Buenos Aires. Heinz Bethke highly values the Argentinians' mentality and their cordial openness: "Lasting friendships grew there." To this day, he still corresponds with many of his ex-colleagues. "In the end, though, you can't get over homesickness."

So it was that Heinz Bethke and his wife returned to Germany in 1978. "I was given an apartment and a company car on a plan that makes virtually brand-new cars available to employees at a special discount price." Until his retirement in 1992 he worked as a technical draftsman in Untertürkheim, as he no longer wanted to work as a photographer: "I had a look at the department, but I didn't want to be one of the crowd and spend my time taking pictures of documents. After all, as a photographer I was accustomed to being my own boss." ●